

Gothic Literary Studies

# The Queer Uncanny

New Perspectives on the Gothic

Paulina Palmer

University of Wales Press



## THE QUEER UNCANNY

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*The Queer Uncanny*  
*New Perspectives on the Gothic*

*Paulina Palmer*



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## PREFACE

I first became interested in writing *The Queer Uncanny* from noticing the number of works of contemporary fiction that use motifs and imagery relating to the uncanny and Gothic to explore and represent different aspects of lesbian, male gay and transgender sexuality and experience.

Since I published *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* in 1999 the interest in the interrelation between ‘Gothic’ and ‘queer’ in both popular culture and academia has increased considerably, and numerous new critical and theoretical texts relating to the topic have appeared in print. In locating the fictional and theoretical texts that I have needed to write the book, I have been fortunate to have access to Gay’s The Word bookshop in London, one of the few remaining queer bookshops in the UK and an invaluable source of material, both new and old. I have also utilized the resources of the Cambridge University Library, and very much appreciate the help provided by the staff.

My work as a sessional lecturer for the MA in Gender and Sexuality at Birkbeck College, University of London, and conversations that I have held with students and members of staff have been intellectually stimulating and influenced my writing, as have the workshops on Gothic and queer writing that I have taught at City Lit College. In addition, I am indebted to Professor Andrew Smith for encouraging my work on the Gothic, to Dr Emma Parker for recommending fiction relevant to the book and to Dr Ana Cecília Acioli Lima for sharing with me her readings of Jeanette Winterson’s novels. I am grateful to Terry Ryman for reading sections of my work in progress, sharing his ideas with me and talking over my readings of texts. I am also greatly indebted to Dr Les Brookes, the author of *Gay Male Fiction Since Stonewall*, for sparing time from his own writing to read and comment on my typescript and discuss my ideas.



*For the queer community in Cambridge*



## *Introduction: Queering the Uncanny*



The uncanny *is* queer. And the queer is uncanny.<sup>1</sup>

### *Fiction, queer perspectives and the uncanny*

Horace Cross, the sixteen-year-old African American protagonist of Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), one of the novels discussed in this study, lives in the rural Christian Fundamentalist community of Tims Creek, North Carolina. Obsessed with guilt on account of his homosexuality and his inability to achieve the heterosexual masculinity that his family expects of him, he takes the risk of confiding the secret of his sexuality to his cousin Jimmy Greene, a minister at the local Baptist church. Jimmy advises him to pray in an effort to resist temptation, confirming Horace's role as sinner and outcast. When his attempts at prayer predictably fail, Horace rejects the rational approach to life that he learnt at school and from the books on science he borrowed from the library and turns, in desperation, to magic. However, instead of the transformation into a bird that he hoped to achieve when he recited the magic spell, he finds himself the victim of a monstrous demon that, erupting from his psyche, takes him on a tour of the neighbourhood. Scenes he is forced to witness include a sermon in the church denouncing the evils of homosexuality and a visit to a community theatre in the

nearby town where he has had affairs with white male actors. Here he sees a black figure dressed as a clown in the act of putting on white makeup, and is horrified to recognize it as himself. He thinks, 'Of all the things he had seen this night, all the memories he had confronted, all the ghouls and ghosts and specters, this shook him the most'.<sup>2</sup> The novel concludes with him taking his grandfather's rifle and shooting himself in the head while his spectral double looks mockingly on.

Kenan's novel – as well as being of interest for its vivid representation of the conflict that Horace experiences, trapped as he is between the homophobia of the local community and his homosexuality, and its imaginative interweaving of fantasy and realism – is notable for its introduction of motifs and ideas relating to the uncanny, many of them recognizable from Sigmund Freud's essay on the topic and the work of theorists writing subsequently. There is, for instance, the idea that uncanny sensations, and the disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar that they generate, reflect the projection of unconscious fears and desires originating in 'something repressed which *recurs*'.<sup>3</sup> This is illustrated by the way Horace's feelings of guilt about his homosexuality and his fear that he has betrayed his racial identity by engaging in affairs with whites return to haunt him, transforming his surroundings into the site of the supernatural. The novel also introduces other motifs with uncanny resonance. These include the secret of Horace's transgressive sexuality which, although the residents of Tims Creek would prefer it to remain hidden, nonetheless comes to light when he discloses it to Jimmy; his encounter with his double at the theatre; and his feelings of uncertainty about his identity – is he homosexual or heterosexual, black or white, a human being, a bird or a monster? In addition, central to the theme of the conflict between contrary value schemes that Kenan treats, there is the fatal shift that Horace undergoes from a rational approach to life to a reliance on superstition and 'old, discarded beliefs'<sup>4</sup> crediting magical transformation and demonic possession. And framing the narrative is the concept of taboo, another topic that Freud foregrounds. It is exemplified here by the Christian Fundamentalist prohibition of homosexuality. Jimmy endorses this by instructing Horace to pray to resist temptation, while the preacher vehemently hammers it home in the sermon he delivers.

Although Kenan's treatment of these themes is uniquely inventive, *A Visitation of Spirits* is not unusual in its use of concepts and motifs relating to the uncanny to represent facets of queer sexuality and experience and society's response to them. A number of other novels by contemporary writers, texts focusing on lesbian and transgender as well as male gay interests, employ them in a similar manner. Hélène Cixous describes the uncanny as appearing 'only on the fringe of something else',<sup>5</sup> while Rosemary Jackson, developing that thought, observes that it 'exists only in relation to the familiar and the normal. It is tangential, to one side.'<sup>6</sup> This tallies with the experience of the queer individual living in a minority subculture and existing, as Sara Ahmed remarks in her discussion of queer phenomenology, 'slant-wise'<sup>7</sup> and in oblique relation to heteronormative society. With this in mind, I aim in this study to investigate the roles that the uncanny plays in a selection of queer fictional texts and the different ways writers represent it. The project raises interesting questions. What roles does the uncanny play in fiction of this kind? Is reference to it introduced merely to arouse a frisson of excitement or unease in the reader or is it pertinent to the themes the writer treats? Which aspects of the uncanny do writers prioritize and which features of queer existence do they employ them to explore? What narrative strategies and structures do they utilize in depicting them? How, if at all, does the lesbian treatment of the uncanny differ from the male gay?

The works of fiction I have selected for discussion, while all published during the period 1980–2007, vary considerably in style and form. Some, such as Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) and Christopher Bram's *Father of Frankenstein* (1995), are overtly Gothic, recasting from a queer perspective narratives and scenarios inscribing spectral visitation, the double and encounters with the monstrous. Others, such as Paul Magrs's *Could It Be Magic?* (1997) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Power Book* (2001), though lacking the dark, scary atmosphere that we associate with Gothic, interrelate fantasy and realism and introduce motifs and imagery with Gothic and uncanny connotations. There is also a third category of fiction on which I focus, exemplified by Emma Donoghue's *Stir-Fry* (1994), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) and Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble* (1990), that is predominantly realist

in style. However, it too employs Gothic imagery and structures. The texts in the latter two categories illustrate the tendency of motifs and imagery relating to the uncanny and Gothic to infiltrate different forms of fiction, demonstrating their versatility and the attraction they continue to hold for writers and readers.

Queer theory, as Annamarie Jagose explains, 'describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherences in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire'.<sup>8</sup> It encompasses a range of different sexualities and, since it is non-specific, has the potential to be utilized in different contexts. The novels that I discuss reflect this multifaceted focus. Some, such as David Leavitt's *While England Sleeps* (1998) and Ellen Galford's *The Dyke and the Dybbuk* (1993), operate primarily in terms of the identity categories 'gay' and 'lesbian'. Others, however, in keeping with the Foucauldian view of such categories as regulatory and oppressive, and influenced by the poststructuralist emphasis on the mobility of desire, seek to destabilize the notion of a stable sexual identification or gender. Accepting the view of identity as contingent and the product of fantasy, they interrogate and deconstruct the binary division of homosexual/heterosexual. Novels adopting this approach include James Purdy's *Mourners Below* (1981), Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and Winterson's *The Power Book*. Fiction, however, unlike theory, frequently avoids defining its ideological perspective explicitly. It tends towards the dialogic, displaying tensions and ambiguities. As a result there is, as we shall see, a significant degree of interaction and overlap between these approaches, with texts combining and interrelating them. The usage of the term 'queer' is itself ambiguous. While employed in academia in relation to queer theory to challenge the concept of a stable sexual identification and problematize the binary division homosexual/heterosexual, it is alternatively used as a form of shorthand to encompass the categories of lesbian, gay and, on occasion, transgender. I use it in both ways, with the context indicating its meaning.

In addition to novels focusing on different sexualities, I discuss others, including Patrick McGrath's *Dr Haggard's Disease* (1993) and Stella Duffy's *Beneath the Blonde* (1997), that deal with transgender and transsexuality. These are topics that feature prominently on the queer agenda since the transgender and transsexual body, as well as

being important in its own right, illustrates in a particularly readable form the constructedness of sex and gender in general.<sup>9</sup> And, taking account of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation that in queer discourse 'Race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality crisscross with other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses',<sup>10</sup> I also consider Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and H. Nigel Thomas's *Spirits in the Dark* (1993) that represent African American and Caribbean constructs of queer sexuality and gender. In investigating the intersection between racial and sexual identifications and exploring different forms of hybridity, these works challenge and help rectify the Eurocentric bias that dominates queer writing.

The novels cited above form the focus of this study. They employ reference to the uncanny to explore, among other topics, what Ahmed describes in *Queer Phenomenology* as the 'dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar' (p. 7) that typifies queer existence in heteronormative society, and the efforts the queer individual makes to resist 'being kept in line, often by force' (p. 83) with its conventions and sexual mores. Some readers may assume that in the present era of civil partnerships and the improvements in the situation of queer people in the West that they reflect, negotiations of this kind are no longer necessary and their fictional representation is outdated. This, however, is not the case. As Jeffrey Weeks writes in his study of present-day lesbian and gay life in Western society aptly entitled *The World We Have Won*, 'Despite really significant transformations, in many quarters homophobia remains rampant, from vicious queer bashing to school bullying, from heterosexist jokes to the minstrelization of openly gay television personalities. A continuing undercurrent of unease remains pervasive.'<sup>11</sup> The increasing visibility of lesbians and gay men has, he observes, employing a phrase that itself has uncanny implications of ambiguity, 'a double edge' (p. 48). While bringing the queer subject a sense of freedom in certain areas of life, it simultaneously generates outbreaks of prejudice and hostility. These tensions and contradictions are registered in some of the novels by British and American writers discussed below. The texts by the Caribbean Thomas and the Trinidadian-Canadian writer Mootoo to which I refer also illustrate particularly vividly the struggles that queer sexuality and existence continue to involve for many people.

## *The Queer Uncanny*

However, before turning to the discussion of fiction, I need to investigate a topic that is pertinent to it and furnishes a cultural and intellectual context for its analysis. This is the infiltration of motifs and images relating to the uncanny into queer theoretical discourse and the varied uses that theorists and critics make of them. As well as creating a frame for the discussion of the novels reviewed below, it sheds light on the interest that present-day writers display in the uncanny, illuminating their treatment of it as a vehicle for queer representation.

### *Theoretical approaches*

The idea that the uncanny has sociopolitical significance and that reference to it can contribute to the perspectives and literature of emergent political movements occurs frequently in twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing. Motifs with uncanny connotations including the spectre and the vampire, the latter employed to represent the processes of modern capitalism, appear in the writing of Karl Marx,<sup>12</sup> while Saul Newman describes the concepts of the return of the repressed and the interplay between the familiar and unfamiliar associated with the uncanny as ‘crucial for politics understood as the attempt to construct something new, coupled with something old’.<sup>13</sup> He observes that ‘Radical politics is always haunted by the ghosts of the past – revolutionary traditions which are dead, yet remain unburied, which have been repressed, yet insist on returning in uncannily familiar forms’ (p. 117). Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, likewise developing the idea of the return of repressed emotions and desires, argue that the abilities of art and the written word to ‘disturb, defamiliarize or shake our beliefs and assumptions are deeply bound up with the uncanny’.<sup>14</sup>

Pertinent to the role that the uncanny plays in queer theory and fiction is Rosemary Jackson’s description of it as expressing ‘drives which have to be *repressed* for the sake of cultural continuity’.<sup>15</sup> She explores the way in which the ghost story, the literary form that Freud cites as illustrating its operations, ‘helps to make visible that which is culturally invisible’ (p. 69), including topics that society regards as unspeakable and taboo. Topics of this kind include, of course, lesbian



and male gay sexuality, and it comes as no surprise to find metaphors and motifs with uncanny connotations, spectral in particular, infiltrating queer theoretical discourse. Diana Fuss's essay collection *Inside/Out*, a publication that in the 1990s helped to promote an interest in homo-spectrality, illustrates some of their uses. Fuss comments on society's attempt to suppress homosexuality by relegating the lesbian and male gay subject to the role of 'phantom other'<sup>16</sup> and describes homosexual and heterosexual economies coexisting uneasily in a form of mutual haunting. She depicts the essays in the collection, though treating different facets of queer experience, as linked by a 'preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as specter and phantom, as spirit and revenant, as abject and undead' (p. 3).

The spectre and phantom, key signifiers of the uncanny, carry connotations of 'excess' since their appearance exceeds the material, and this is another concept that connects the uncanny with 'queer'. The role of the uncanny as a signifier of excess is reflected in its ability, as Rosemary Jackson describes, to uncover the unfamiliar beneath the familiar and, by challenging the conventional view of reality as unitary, to prompt the subject to question mainstream, 'common-sense' versions of it. As James R. Kincaid remarks, the uncanny involves perceptions and phenomena that 'lie outside the realm of the explicable, outside of language',<sup>17</sup> such as fantasy and dreams which transcend rational explanation. Queer theorists too depict homosexuality, on account of its invisibility and transgressive dimension, as evoking (from a phallogocentric viewpoint) connotations of excess. Lee Edelman argues that from a heteronormative viewpoint, the male homosexual – like the female – signifies both 'excess' and 'lack',<sup>18</sup> while Fuss represents homosexuality as occupying the role of 'supplement'<sup>19</sup> to heterosexuality, necessary to its self-definition though regarded by many as a threat. Lisabeth During and Terri Fealy portray gay culture itself as signifying 'a culture of excess'.<sup>20</sup> They investigate how 'the representations of the "respectable" world are turned upside down' in it, citing in illustration the different forms of role-play and innuendo that the gay individual employs in 'moving incognito through a heterosexual world'.<sup>21</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman also associates lesbianism with excess. Arguing that lesbian desire 'functions as excess within the heterosexual economy',<sup>22</sup> she illustrates how postmodern writers, in seeking to represent it, interrogate and

critique accepted norms of both sexuality and textuality through their experimental use of narrative and the excessive proliferation of storytelling and fantasy it inscribes. This is the kind of narrative that, as we shall see, Smith's *Hotel World*, Waters's *Fingersmith* and Winterson's *The Stone Gods* create in interweaving multiple storylines and recasting from a lesbian viewpoint literary genres with hetero-normative associations.

Other motifs associated with the uncanny also infiltrate queer theory. They include doubling, a compulsion to repeat and different forms of mimicry and performance, such as that exemplified by the automaton Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'. Whereas Freud tends to ignore Olympia in 'The uncanny', focusing his reading of Hoffmann's story on the male protagonist, Jane Marie Todd relates her to woman's oppressed social role and performance of femininity.<sup>23</sup> Mimicry and performance feature in queer theory with reference to the way in which gay and lesbian roles comment parodically on heterosexual roles; they reveal their constructedness, exposing them, to cite Butler, as 'a kind of naturalized gender mime'.<sup>24</sup>

Ideas of 'uncertainty' and 'ambivalence' also connect the uncanny with 'queer'. Freud describes how the word '*heimlich* . . . develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*',<sup>25</sup> while Royle, representing 'the emergence of "queer" . . . as a formidable example of the contemporary significance of the uncanny', cites 'generative, creative uncertainties about sexual identity'<sup>26</sup> as linking the two concepts. Reference to ambivalence and ambiguity features in addition in the discussion of queer existence and social life. Harold Beaver, commenting on the closeted lifestyle that many lesbians and gay men feel forced to lead, humorously observes that 'homosexuals, like Masons, live not in an alternative culture but in a duplicate culture of constantly interrupted and overlapping roles. They must learn to live with ambiguity. Every sign becomes duplicitous, slipping back and forth across a wavering line.'<sup>27</sup> The term 'queer' itself hinges on ambiguity for, while employed colloquially as a tool of homophobic abuse, it also operates somewhat precariously in the manner of a reverse discourse, as a tool of gay resistance. Les Brookes in fact argues that 'Ambiguity is central to *queer's* self-identity',<sup>28</sup> citing in evidence the equivocal approach that queer theorists adopt to identity categories. He refers, by way of

illustration, to Butler's remark that though willing to appear under the sign 'lesbian' at political events, she would 'like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies'.<sup>29</sup> While criticizing the regulatory, oppressive effect of identity categories, she nonetheless acknowledges their political usefulness and the need for us to resignify them positively.

A sense of ambivalence and uncertainty is also prominent, as numerous publications ranging from the 1990s to the present day illustrate, in the response that the queer movement has elicited from the Anglo-American lesbian and male gay community. Members of it, myself included, while welcoming certain features of the queer agenda such as its representation of sexuality as diverse and mobile and its deconstruction of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, regard others as problematic and retrograde. As well as criticizing the lack of specificity, excessive utopianism and resultant political ineffectiveness of 'queer', they alert attention to its narrowly American connotations and limited metropolitan associations.<sup>30</sup> They also complain of the elitist associations that queer perspectives have acquired in shifting from a grass-roots activist movement that came into being, as Iain Morland describes, 'through the turbulent conjunction of theory and politics'<sup>31</sup> to an academic discourse that shows signs of losing its political vigour. Another criticism directed at queer theory is that, though its advocates claim it to be gender-neutral, it nonetheless reflects an 'overwhelming maleness'.<sup>32</sup> As a result, its utilization frequently erases the specificity and importance of lesbian culture and history. It also fails to acknowledge the contribution that the lesbian feminist movement has made both to the struggle for sexual liberation and the formation of queer politics itself.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note that reference to ideas and motifs relating to the uncanny, as well as infiltrating queer theory and the debates that it has provoked, also feature in the discourse of lesbian feminism that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. A topic pivotal to the work of Adrienne Rich is 'the Great Silence'<sup>34</sup> to which lesbianism has been subjected as a result of being regarded as unmentionable. Elizabeth Meese, in addition, employs uncanny imagery to explore lesbian invisibility and the instability of the sign 'lesbian'. Commenting on the sign's slipperiness and the difficulty women experience in finding a language to articulate same-sex desire on account of it being

pathologized, she writes eloquently: 'Lesbian is a word written in invisible ink, readable when held up to a flame and self-consuming, a disappearing trick before my eyes where the letters appear and fade into the paper in which they are written.'<sup>35</sup> Her evocation of the fluid, shifting nature of the sign looks forward to Butler's recommendation that its meaning should remain open and unfixed, furnishing an example of the way lesbian feminism has on occasion anticipated queer perspectives.

And while, as illustrated above, the discourses of queer, lesbian and male gay sexuality abound with references to concepts and metaphors with uncanny significance, so too does that of transgender and transsexuality. Significant in this respect is Freud's association of the uncanny with the psychological phenomenon of 'doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self' and the sense of 'doubt as to which his self is'<sup>36</sup> that this can generate in the individual. Jay Prosser remarks on the sense of doubling and 'gendered contradiction and ambiguity'<sup>37</sup> that the transsexual can experience in feeling trapped in the wrong body and experiencing a conflict existing between his 'real' inner body and his 'false' outer one. He employs spectral imagery to evoke the phantomic dimension of the body that the transsexual regards as signifying his 'real' embodiment and strives to 'liberate' (p. 163). Royle, developing Freudian thought, associates the uncanny with 'the experience of oneself as a foreign body'.<sup>38</sup> The transsexual's view of the body with which he is born as alien, conflicting with his 'real' embodiment and self, vividly exemplifies this uncanny sensation of 'foreign' embodiment.

### *Queering the Gothic*

Accompanying the infiltration of motifs and ideas relating to the uncanny into queer, lesbian and transgender theoretical discourses, illustrated above, there is another form of infiltration and cross-fertilization pertinent to this study that is currently taking place – one that operates in reverse. This is the influx of queer interests and perspectives into Gothic critical studies. This too is relevant to the novels that I discuss, many of which appropriate and recast Gothic motifs, imagery and narrative structures.

Gothic is a highly mobile and fluid literary form. As Julian Wolfreys observes, 'Traces, remnants, ruins of the Gothic are found everywhere, in fiction and non-fiction alike, in realist and fantasy literature'.<sup>39</sup> He concludes his discussion of the mobility of its conventions and motifs with the observation that 'in short, Gothic transgresses the borders between the living and dead, between past and present literary formations, in resurgent spectral ways' (p. 97). The ability of Gothic to transgress, in both the 'itinerant' and 'unorthodox' senses of the term, is particularly apparent in its encounter with queer. For while theorists such as Edelman, Fuss and Rich utilize motifs and metaphors with uncanny connotations to investigate homosexual and lesbian desire and society's attempts to suppress it, critics working in the field of Gothic studies, influenced by the growth of queer theory and the development of gender studies in academia, investigate the queer dimension of the Gothic. Developing Rosemary Jackson's emphasis on the unorthodox nature of Gothic fantasy and its ability to articulate the individual's and society's repressed fears and desires, they uncover and bring to light reference to 'perverse' sexualities and genders in texts previously interpreted in a predominantly heteronormative context.

It is of course possible to claim, as William Hughes and Andrew Smith do, that 'Gothic has, in a sense, always been "queer"'<sup>40</sup> since it has traditionally focused on deviant forms of sexuality that mainstream society defines as taboo or transgressive. However, the critical discussion of Gothic texts with specific reference to queer theory and its interests, as is taking place in critical studies today, marks a relatively new intellectual departure. Here I have space to mention only a few of the critics who have contributed to this project, ones whose ideas are especially relevant to the novels discussed below. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, acclaimed for her pioneering work in queer theory, was one of the first critics to comment on the connections with male homosexuality apparent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction. In 1985 she coined the term 'paranoid Gothic',<sup>41</sup> using it to describe novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* that portray two male characters locked in an unstable relationship in which erotic attraction interacts with persecutory violence. William Veeder's discussion of homosexuality in Robert Louis

Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, developed by Elaine Showalter and George Haggerty, also breaks new ground.<sup>42</sup> Significant too is Haggerty's perceptive thesis that certain eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic texts, in challenging, redefining and expanding the rigid classifications of sexuality proposed by the sexologists, are relevant to the history of ideas. He argues that they give a glimpse of 'behaviors otherwise invisible' in earlier culture, anticipating developments in the history of sexuality.<sup>43</sup>

Reference to Gothic motifs is also in evidence in lesbian history, as illustrated by Terry Castle's analysis of the spectralization of the lesbian in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction as reflecting an attempt on the part of hetero-patriarchal culture to banish and exorcize the perceived threat of female same-sex desire.<sup>44</sup> Among lesbian critical readings of particular fictional texts, Lucie Armitt's analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* merits comment. In illustrating that 'walled up . . . within the patriarchal text of the wallpaper is an alternative sexual identity' that the female protagonist seeks to liberate, Armitt demonstrates that Gilman's novella, as she wittily puts it, 'is concerned not just with "breaking out" but also, more significantly, with "coming out"'.<sup>45</sup>

Transgender, though it has until now generated less critical interest than lesbianism and male homosexuality in Gothic studies, is also starting to receive attention. This is illustrated by Kelly Hurley's analysis (1987) of Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* and the uncanny sex changes that the eponymous figure performs.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to investigating representations of queer sexuality and gender in Gothic texts produced in earlier periods, critics also discuss the queer recasting of Gothic motifs and narrative structures by present-day writers. Andrew Smith examines the parodic reworking of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Will Self's *Dorian*,<sup>47</sup> while in *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* I discuss the utilization of Gothic conventions by contemporary women writers as a vehicle to represent lesbian sexuality and its sociopolitical import. I develop my interest in contemporary fiction here, extending it to encompass male gay and transgender as well as lesbian texts.

The interplay that, as illustrated above, is increasingly taking place between Gothic and 'queer' is particularly relevant to those novels reviewed in the following chapters that recast narratives appropriated

from canonical Gothic works. Bram's *Father of Frankenstein* and Waters's *Fingersmith*, both discussed in chapter 2, exemplify this strategy. Bram constructs his fictionalized account of the final days in the life of James Whale, the homosexual director of the two acclaimed 1930s Frankenstein films, around intertextual references to Mary Shelley's novel, while Waters in *Fingersmith* develops from a lesbian viewpoint the representations of female romantic friendships and attachments in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Dickens's *Bleak House*. Other writers, including Galford, Purdy and Smith, queer the figures of the ghost, the double and the witch, as well as reworking certain well-known Gothic tropes and motifs. These include, as we shall see, the family secret and curse, the repressed relationship between mother and daughter, the uncanny city, the breakdown of the family unit on account of paternal incest and the contrast between benevolent and tyrannical father figures.

*Fiction and its queer phantoms*

The infiltration of motifs and images with uncanny resonance into queer theory, combined with the inflow of queer perspectives into Gothic critical writing illustrated above, understandably create a fertile ground for the treatment of topics and ideas relating to the uncanny in contemporary fiction. As indicated by the roles that they play in Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, discussed at the start of this chapter, references to the uncanny can take a variety of forms and perform different functions. They infiltrate the characters' trajectories and perceptions, inform the design of the narrative and furnish writers with a rich source of imagery to represent and explore queer subjectivity and experience. The disconcerting sense that the queer individual sometimes has of living in two interlinked but disparate worlds, the heteronormative and the less immediately visible one of the lesbian or gay subculture, lends itself particularly well to uncanny treatment. The synopsis of the chapters below indicates other facets of queer existence and their uncanny dimension that receive discussion in the pages that lie ahead.

Chapter 2, 'Secrets and their Disclosure', focuses on a motif that plays a pivotal role in contemporary queer studies. Schelling, as Freud

writes, describes the *unheimlich* as ‘the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light’,<sup>48</sup> while Sedgwick illustrates the relevance of this comment to queer existence by depicting homosexuality as signifying a key secret of phallogentric culture, marking the pairings of other binaries such as knowledge/ignorance and private/public.<sup>49</sup> I open the chapter by discussing Donoghue’s and Hensher’s treatment of the secrets and revelations that coming out and outing involve, along with the psychological strains and furtive pleasures attendant on the closet and the acts of passing that it promotes. I also examine the treatment of secrets relating to death and the fears they evoke in AIDS narratives by Tóibín and Schulman. The chapter concludes with reference to two novels by Waters and Leavitt. Set in the 1930s and 1940s, they investigate the secrets and revelations informing lesbian and male homosexual history.

Chapter 3, ‘Queer Spectrality’, opens with reference to the queering of the ghost story in two novels by Purdy and Smith. The ‘phantom text’, a term associated with Jacques Derrida registering the fact that no text is an independent entity since all are intertextually haunted by others,<sup>50</sup> also receives attention. I analyse novels by Bram and Waters, both of which recast from a queer perspective narratives from Victorian Gothic, in order to illustrate this concept. The double, a motif associated with the ghost and the role of uncanny double of the deceased that it performs, also receives attention. Duffy and McGrath, employing the popular genres of the thriller and the Gothic mystery, utilize the motif to investigate the sensation of gendered ambiguity and self-division that the transgender and transsexual subject can experience.

Different locations and spaces, psychological as well as domestic and geographical, traditionally feature in narrative as sites of uncanny sensations and perceptions. Chapter 4, ‘Place and Space’, investigates the role that they play in queer fiction. Jim Grimsley’s *Dream Boy*, situated in North America, and Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, set in the Caribbean, treat the motif of the haunted house. The two writers investigate male gay and lesbian rural existence, helping to remedy the neglect that, as Halberstam observes, the topic has received in fiction.<sup>51</sup> Winterson and Hollinghurst focus in contrast on urban locations, recasting the Gothic topos of the uncanny city.



They portray male gay and lesbian urban subcultures as exemplifying a culture of excess, their codes and fashions parodying or inverting the conventions of heteronormative society. Rituals and ceremonies with queer significance centring on different geographical and domestic locations depicted in Thomas's *Spirits in the Dark* and Tartt's *A Secret History* also receive discussion.

The figure of the monster, familiar from Victorian Gothic fiction and present-day horror film, frequently carries homophobic associations for, as Halberstam writes, 'Within contemporary horror, the monster tends to show clearly the markings of deviant sexualities and gendering'.<sup>52</sup> The stigmatization of lesbians and gay men as freakish and unnatural, along with texts by contemporary writers seeking to interrogate and challenge this bigoted view, receive attention in chapter 5 entitled 'Monstrous Others'. Novels considered here include Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Winterson's dystopian fantasy *The Stone Gods*. The concept of the comic uncanny,<sup>53</sup> a category associated with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, is exemplified by Galford's *The Dyke and the Dybbuk* and Magrs's *Could It Be Magic?* As well as exposing the image of the homosexual and transgender individual as monstrous and unnatural as a construct created by homophobic society, the two writers exuberantly celebrate, in a series of carnivalesque episodes, instances of queer vitality and jouissance.

In addition to the themes and motifs referred to above, there are others that I have chosen to comment on throughout the study rather than discussing them in particular chapters, since they recur in a number of novels. The 'unhomely home' is significant here. Originating in Freud's reference to the etymological relation between the terms *unheimlich* and *heimlich* and the connection they display,<sup>54</sup> it evokes a domestic space that, though ostensibly warm and secure, is disturbed by secrets and the return of repressed fears and desires. The implications that it evokes of a tension or clash between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the strange, make it particularly relevant to queer existence. Writers treat the motif in contrary ways. Whereas Hensher, Purdy and Tóibín portray the hetero-patriarchal home destabilized by the revelation of homosexual secrets from within, Leavitt and Waters foreground the reverse. They represent the domestic life of the gay couple disrupted by the intrusion of homophobic influences and ideologies from the public world outside. In